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In Memoriam: Mickey Mantle

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It was just a few weeks ago that we went through the spectacle of Mickey Mantle's liver transplant which gave us a preview of the sort of emotional outpouring that would come at his death. At the time the surgery seemed to be a success and there was hope that Mickey would survive. We now know that this was not to be, as the cancer spread quickly throughout Mickey's body. His doctors tell us that they have never seen such a virulent form of cancer as it moved with incredible speed. But then with Mickey nothing was ordinary.

His entire career was marked by the extraordinary, from the enormity of his home runs to his speed in the field Mickey Mantle was beyond all the rest. For the successor to Joe DiMaggio in center-field anything less would have been unacceptable to Yankee fans, and indeed in the early years Mickey was regarded by some as a bumpkin from Oklahoma who was a silly pretender to the throne. But not for long.

In a city in which center fielders of extraordinary talent seemed commonplace, Mickey eventually transcended them all, in legend, if not on the field. Duke Snider in Brooklyn and Willie Mays with the Giants had their loyal supporters in the unending debate over who was better, Mickey, Willie or the Duke. The debate was settled when the Duke left for LA with the Dodgers, and Mays headed West to the City by the Bay where his greatness was never fully appreciated. That left New York to Mantle and the Yankees. Mickey owned New York and he was loved deeply by Yankee fans everywhere. The Yankees were New York and loved or hated around the country.

Major league baseball came to my hometown in 1961 and when the Yanks came to Minneapolis to play the Twins it was always difficult to know which was the home team. At least half the crowd were Yankee fans. They cheered lustily for the Bronx Bombers, and never louder than when Mickey came to the plate. He was easily the most popular player to step to the plate in those years in the Twin Cities, surpassing even the hometown hero Harmon Killebrew.

Over the past several days millions of words have been written about the achievements of Mickey Mantle, many have commented on him as a player, a hero, a human being, and a tragic figure. All of these Mickey Mantle's are a part of his greatness and help

explain why there has been such an outpouring of affection for him.

Six weeks ago Robert Lipsyte writing in The New York Times recalled that Mantle was a hero to those white male fans who came to sports consciousness in the Fifties. Lipsyte believes that Mantle perfectly played out the myth of the cold war icon, the shy westerner who played through pain. He also was the player who embodied the cool of the fifties, so cool in fact that he was offended by the style of Pete Rose. It was Mantle who hung the term "Charlie Hustle" on Pete, and it was not meant to be a compliment.

He was playing in a time when his flaws did not seem important. Media scrutiny wasn't a part of the sports scene. Mickey Mantle was a Yankee, the best Yankee, and every year he seemed to be in the World Series and seemed to perform at his best on center stage. He was the simple country boy who made it big in the city, an American hero from the heartland. Nothing else mattered. The Fifties was a simpler time without shades of gray, when heroes did not have flaws. It was a time of contrived innocence and Mantle was its idol.

When Jim Bouton unloaded in his now classic book *Ball Four*, and Mantle was revealed as a drunk, a womanizer, and a very unpleasant human being who could be extremely cruel to teammates and fans, it was Bouton who was chastised by the baseball commissioner and the public, not the Mick. Mantle banging bus doors on the hands of small boys, or rudely and crudely refusing to sign autographs, Mantle drunk and out of control, was not the Mantle of the sports pages of the Fifties, and Mantle's fans didn't want to hear it.

It was also a time when baseball was a sport and a game, not a business, we are told. But of course it was a business, but one in which owners took home the profits paying players whatever they felt like paying them. It was the good old days of the reserve clause when Mantle could be told after an average year for him, which was a great year for anyone else, that he didn't measure up to expectations and therefore would have his pay cut. And there was nothing the Mick or anyone else could do about it. The owners were in total control of the players.

Those who today mourn the passing of Mickey Mantle and long for those good old days should remember not only the dark side of Mickey Mantle and the state of baseball in the Fifties, but

should remember that it wasn't really such a simple and innocent time either.

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